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## Technological University City's Programme for Students Learning with Communities: a Critical Account of Practice

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# Dublin Institute of Technology's Programme for Students Learning With Communities – a critical account of practice.

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## **Abstract**

This paper focuses on the process of critically evaluating Dublin Institute of Technology's Programme for Students Learning With Communities after its first year of operation. The Programme supports and promotes community-based learning/service-learning across DIT. The paper is in the form of a case-study, wherein we outline the context for our work, address both strengths and weaknesses of our practice to date, and comment briefly on wider implications. After nine months we carried out an evaluation of our Programme and identified four main areas where we felt there was potential for improvement: reflection on learning; the nature and quality of student, staff and community engagement on projects; project evaluations; student involvement in project planning and recruitment to community-based research projects. We address each area in turn and describe the actions that we have taken to date to enhance our service delivery. We give some initial thoughts on the implications of our work. This paper will be of value to students, educators and community partners interested in the possibilities inherent in students learning with communities, and in the process of reflection on this work.

**Keywords:** engagement, community, collaboration, service-learning, community-based learning, evaluation.

## Introduction

As we face unprecedented economic, social, political and environmental challenges, we need to support the development of socially responsible citizens with relevant experience and skills, determined to work for change. Launching the Task Force on Active Citizenship in Ireland in 2006, the former Taoiseach (Irish prime minister) Bertie Ahern said 'Today, when the scarcest resource of all is time, this role of active participation is being devolved to fewer and fewer people. In the process, we all risk being impoverished, especially those who opt out and leave the responsibilities of citizenship to others'.

The formal education system can help address this emerging crisis. One way is to incorporate programmes into curricula giving students the opportunity to engage in a structured way with communities that are socially, culturally or economically disadvantaged in some way. Through this experience, students gain the opportunity to learn about themselves, their academic discipline and future profession, their community partners, and how together they can work to address the challenges facing society, locally and globally.

In September 2008 the Programme for Students Learning With Communities was established in the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT)<sup>1</sup>. Its remit is to develop the practices of community-based learning (CBL) and community-based research (CBR) in DIT, through local, national and international collaboration with community and voluntary organisations, educational institutions, and industry where appropriate.

This article is co-written by the two full time staff on the Programme for Students Learning With Communities. Our aim is to critically analyse our practice from September 2008 to September 2009, in particular the self-evaluation process we undertook, and to invite feedback and comments<sup>2</sup>.

The article arises out of a process of self-evaluation which we undertook in mid-summer 2009, using Shumer's (2000) Self-Assessment for Service-

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<sup>1</sup> This was the successor to a 3-year pilot community-based learning initiative which concluded in August 2008, funded from a different source, and located in a different faculty in DIT. Students Learning With Communities is part of the DIT Community Links Programme, under the directorate of Academic Affairs, funded under the Strategic Innovation Fund by Ireland's Department of Education and Science, through the Higher Education Authority, under the National Development Plan.

<sup>2</sup> As we are consistently reviewing and revising our practice, as well as disseminating our ideas, we welcome queries and critical feedback on all of the work described above. Please address these to [slwc@dit.ie](mailto:slwc@dit.ie).

Learning toolkit, as well as internally designed feedback and evaluation tools. We also consider a report written in 2007 by visiting Fulbright scholar Edward Zlotkowski on DIT as an 'engaged institution'. We address the implications of the evaluation process itself, as well as identifying the main issues which arose from it.

We hope that by sharing our experiences, challenges and opportunities, others can benefit as they work to enhance student learning through community engagement.

## **1. Context and philosophy**

Students Learning With Communities in DIT is geographically and theoretically located between the American tradition of service-learning (or CBL), and the European Science Shop movement (mainly CBR). While both are about developing collaborative accredited projects between students and community groups, they have slightly different philosophies. According to Learn and Serve America (no date): 'Service-Learning is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities [...] The core concept driving this educational strategy is that by combining service objectives and learning objectives, along with the intent to show measurable change in both the recipient and the provider of the service, the result is a radically-effective transformative method of teaching students.' The term 'service' indicates the social origins of this movement in volunteering. While American service-learning has now moved to a model of reciprocal collaboration between community and college, the structures of some service-learning programmes can still hearken back to a model of the community as beneficiary (such as those where students are required to volunteer for a set number of hours in a community organisation in order to get credits).

The European Science Shops' origins combine technical research and social concerns. 'Science Shops are organisations that offer citizens' groups free or very low-cost access to scientific and technological knowledge and research in order to help them achieve social and environmental improvement [...] Science Shops provide independent, participatory research support in response to concerns experienced by civil society [...] The term 'science' in our sense is used broadly and includes the social and human sciences, as well as natural, physical, engineering and technical sciences. Science Shops [involve] bi-directional knowledge transfer' (Søgaard Jørgensen *et al*, 2004, p. 15). Science Shops first emerged in Dutch universities during the 1970s and are now

widespread across Europe and beyond (in the US and elsewhere this is known as CBR). Social science research questions, rather than technical ones, now predominate in some Science Shops. While Science Shops focus on the possibility of effecting policy change, some projects with a technical emphasis can sideline personal learning and the development of social insight (Zlotkowski, 2010).

Students Learning With Communities in DIT straddles both these traditions. In line with the American tradition, and DIT's vocational education roots<sup>3</sup>, we focus on project-based work (CBL), and in the European spirit we are also developing CBR, through a webpage advertising community research questions, and a new non-discipline-specific module on CBR which is being piloted in 2010. As in American colleges, communities do not contribute financially to any of our projects. We have come to adopt the European emphasis on working for policy change. We work with the community from an asset-based perspective (focusing on the assets and strengths they bring to the collaboration, rather than just on their needs), and aim to maximise personal, technical and social learning for all partners.

## **2. Evaluating our first year – student learning and our own practice**

Students Learning With Communities completed its first year in September 2009. During that first year, students on 31 modules across all 6 faculties in DIT, undergraduate and postgraduate, engaged in learning with communities. By September 2009, 20 further modules were being planned – either new modules being devised, or existing modules being adapted to include CBL or CBR. We were also developing two major interdisciplinary projects.

As our role was to support staff, students and community partners in these projects and to maximise learning for all, we felt that by carrying out an evaluation of the overall Programme for Students Learning With

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<sup>3</sup> DIT originated in the vocational education sector in the late nineteenth century when several vocational colleges were set up in Dublin's inner-city, under the City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee. In 1992 these were merged into DIT, which is now the largest third-level institution in Ireland, awarding a wide range of qualifications from higher certificates to doctoral degrees. Many of the programmes still have a strong emphasis on applied learning and applied research, and close links with industry. DIT has a strong record of community engagement, through the Community Links Programme. It has a long record of admitting and supporting students from diverse backgrounds through the Access and Disability services. It is a member of the Talloires Network, Campus Compact, the Living Knowledge Network, and the University Social Responsibility Alliance, all committed to expanding the civic engagement of universities.

Communities we would be clearer on the 'efficiency' and 'effectiveness' of the Programme (Merrill 2005, Fisher & Cole 1993). This was a formative rather than a summative evaluation, as we were only one year into a three-year pilot programme. We intended this evaluation to guide us in planning our actions for the following year: 'The purpose of program evaluation is [...] to support decisions regarding how to proceed. While it is not formally part of the evaluation process, the final step in any evaluation is to use the findings to make decisions regarding program retention and/or program improvement' (RMC Research Corporation, no date).

In our evaluation we were interested in how participants (including students, staff, community partners and ourselves) interpreted their own experiences, and in how they perceived the programme, rather than in quantifying outcomes through numbers (e.g. grades of students). This meant that our framework was illuminative (social science/interpretative) rather than scientific (positivist/hypothesis-testing) (Parlett and Hamilton 1972). 'The aims of illuminative enquiry are to study the innovatory program: how it operates; how it is influenced by the various school situations in which it is applied; what those directly concerned regard as its advantages and disadvantages; and how students' intellectual tasks and academic experiences are most affected [, ...] the innovation's most significant features [...] and critical processes' (Parlett and Hamilton 1972, p. 11). We were also conscious that we were promoting reflection as an invaluable part of learning in CBL projects, and felt that we ourselves should be reflective practitioners.

As a result, during the summer of 2009 we took several days to assess our work using three different methods. The first was a consideration of an unpublished report on The Dublin Institute of Technology as an Engaged Institution by Edward Zlotkowski (2007), visiting Fulbright Scholar to DIT, which pre-dated our project, but only by a year. The second was to assess a number of completed questionnaires from students, staff, and community partners, which had been returned to us at the end of the academic year. The final step was to analyse our own practices ourselves, using the publicly available Shumer (2000) Self-Assessment for Service-Learning tool.

We were very lucky to have had a detailed report written on DIT (just before our project started) by a visiting scholar with such expertise in civic engagement as Zlotkowski. In his report, Zlotkowski (2007) suggested that DIT's 'mission, its location, its demonstrated commitment to access, and its valuing of practical, pre-professional disciplines and hands-on learning might well lead one to identify it as a prime candidate for engaged status. Certainly its history and values make it a more likely

candidate than any other third-level institution in Dublin. However, it is also clear that the DIT, in its current form, would not meet all the criteria that mark an engaged campus. By far the most important adjustment it would have to make would be to strengthen its commitment to the scholarship of engagement' (2007, p. 5). He used this term 'scholarship of engagement' as per Ernest Boyer's (1996, p. 5) definition: 'connecting the rich resources of the university to our most pressing social, civic, and ethical problems...Campuses would be viewed by both students and professors not as isolated islands, but as staging grounds for action'.

Zlotkowski observed that despite the positive attitude of many academics in DIT to community-focused academic projects, most of these projects were delivered 'through' or 'about' the community instead of 'with' it (2007, p. 5), thus the need for more collaborative academic-community partnerships. He felt that these projects were generally valued by the institute at the level of 'learning by doing', neglecting the multilayered possibilities of helping students become self-reflective, critical thinkers and enabling them to 'relate theory to practice, self to society, individual project to surrounding system' (2007, p. 5). To enable this he suggested the need to embed reflective practices in curricula, and to outline a clear and comprehensive account of such activities in the institution. Zlotkowski argued that through the support of the Irish Higher Education Authority (HEA), DIT could reform its strategic plan to incorporate a vision of a scholarship of engagement, and invest resources and capacity to support and deliver on this vision of engagement. The HEA has undertaken some funding and policy work in this area since this report was written<sup>4</sup>.

This outside perspective matched our own sense of the strengths and weaknesses of our programme, and the post-project questionnaires<sup>5</sup> returned to us also highlighted these. Strengths for students included the development of a wide range of transferable and professional skills, such as communication and teamwork skills, time management and problem-solving, as well as the enhancement of their academic learning – these benefits have also been documented in a range of studies (Søgaard Jørgensen et al 2004, Hurd 2008).

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<sup>4</sup> Since then the HEA has recommended 'the universal adoption of service-learning components in all undergraduate qualifications' in its submission to the National Strategy for Higher Education (2009, p. 3), and funded The Programme for Students Learning With Communities in DIT for three years.

<sup>5</sup> It was clear to us from the outset that if we wanted to learn about student learning as they engaged with communities then we needed to provide tools by which we could record these experiences. As a result we devised post-project evaluation forms to be disseminated at the end of the project. The information provided about student learning from these forms was very insightful.

"I learnt to be more adaptable in different situations and that I can talk to all different people from various walks of life"; "it gave me a great opportunity to practice skills which would be necessary in my professional career... to improve my team working skills"; "no matter how well organised you are it might not always work out....you have to think on your feet and go with the flow" – extracts from DIT student questionnaires, 2009.

A few students also developed some critical insight into future work contexts, and into larger issues that might potentially affect their work practice – one student mentioned the possible conflict between a hospital and a community clinic. This was, however, the exception rather than the rule, highlighting a potential pitfall which Zlotkowski had identified, which could lessen the possibilities for student learning. If students were not required to reflect on their learning they were likely to miss out on many of the benefits of learning with communities, such as learning about themselves as learners, and learning from their mistakes. If they were not required to have good quality, frequent contact with their community partners, they could miss the opportunity to develop awareness of social and economic inequalities, and of the potential role of their future profession in society. These are common challenges identified by most of the CBL/CBR staff we have encountered internationally across a range of higher education institutions, so it was no surprise to find this in our self-evaluation. According to Parlett and Hamilton:

‘Learning milieux, despite their diversity, share many characteristics. Instruction is constrained by similar conventions, subject divisions, and degrees of student involvement. Teachers encounter parallel sets of problems. Students’ learning, participation, study habits, and examination techniques are found to follow common lines; and innovations, as such, face habitual difficulties and provoke familiar reactions’ (Parlett and Hamilton 1972, p. 30).

The challenge of encouraging students to reflect, in particular on their learning about society, also featured in our staff evaluation forms: “formal reflection methods were not used” (possibly due to time constraints, lack of confidence or experience in teaching reflection, or lack of awareness of the importance of incorporating reflection into the project); “although I had envisaged that it would be a pilot, there was not as much interaction as was necessary for such a project to maximise benefits that could be accrued to the stakeholders”.



Having identified broadly similar patterns of challenges in the evaluation forms and in Zlotkowski's report, we then turned to an analysis of our own practice. We spent some time researching available self-evaluation tools – there are many of these available on-line. Broadly speaking these tools enable professionals working with community-based learning to critically evaluate their initiatives in this area and to improve them. We considered several helpful tools including Andy Furco's (1999) Self-Assessment Rubric for the Institutionalization of Service-Learning in Higher Education, and Youth Service California's (2004) Service-Learning Dipstick: A Project Planning and Assessment Tool<sup>6</sup>. These gave several thematic areas to consider, with questions on each, and a scale of levels of achievement for each area. We decided, however, to use the Shumer (2000) Self-Assessment for Service-Learning (SSASL) template. This is made up of a series of questions that enable practitioners to make an initial assessment of their performance against a number of criteria. The tool offers further in-depth questions to pick apart areas which are identified as needing work, from the initial set of broad questions. These pointed to the actions needed to take the next steps forward – this additional depth was a layer we felt we needed in our self-evaluation. It also fit in with our 'illuminative' approach to enquiry: 'Beginning with an extensive data base, the researchers systematically reduce the breadth of their enquiry to give more concentrated attention to the emerging issues' (Parlett and Hamilton 1972, p. 20).

This Self-Assessment tool can be used at various levels of CBL initiatives – to analyse the whole community-based learning programme across an institution, as delivered by a supporting office such as ours, or at a College or Departmental or even a project level. It can also be used at different times within a programme or project: at the beginning, middle and/or end. We decided to complete Shumer's Self-Assessment as a team rather than individually, and this enabled us to have very productive discussions about our work in the process of reaching agreement on how to answer certain questions.

The tool enabled us to identify key strengths and weaknesses. The strengths we identified included: the clear philosophy of our Programme; embedding CBL and CBR projects in the curricula; CBL and CBR projects being widely seen as a means to improve teaching and learning across the college; and our ability to initiate new projects and support existing ones. Our focus in this paper, however, as when we used the Self-

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<sup>6</sup> More detailed evaluation guidelines such as the RMC Research Corporation's (no date) *Educator's Guide to Service-Learning Program Evaluation*, while excellent resources, we felt were beyond the scale of our planned evaluation.

Assessment tool, is on addressing the challenges rather than focusing on the strengths.

One of the weaknesses which the Self-Assessment highlighted was the need for us to develop student involvement in all stages of the process of designing and implementing projects. We were primarily working with staff and community partners, as those with the most capacity to initiate projects, and in order to promote student buy-in we needed to develop mechanisms through which to involve students directly.

We also identified a weakness in relation to evaluating our work. While we had designed and distributed post-project evaluation forms to staff, to be filled out by them, their community partners and their students, the forms had not been returned in large numbers. Even then we had nothing with which to compare the responses we received: we started to work on evaluation in early 2009, when most projects had already started, so it was too late to design and circulate pre-project questionnaires.

Two further weaknesses which we identified ourselves were not addressed in depth in Shumer's Self-Assessment (the Self-Assessment would benefit from being amended to include these). One weakness related to the personal learning and social awareness/insight learning outcomes of the projects, mentioned above. While student projects had clearly articulated academic learning outcomes, students were not always required to reflect on their learning, and therefore the personal and social dimensions of their learning were not being assessed. Students were not necessarily learning about structural social inequalities, the implications of their profession's role in society, and the need for them as future professionals to work for social change. As we were both new to the field of CBL it took us several months to absorb that social critique and social change could and should be a goal for the projects, and then to start promoting this among teaching staff. While Shumer's Self-Assessment asks whether the projects have 'significant consequences', the goals of social critique and social change are not specifically addressed.

The second weakness we identified was the quality and depth of students' engagement with the community. While in some projects students were building meaningful relationships over time with community members, in others they had no contact with the community. In the latter case they relied on the staff member's development of a project brief from his/her encounter with a community representative, and in a few cases students did not have the opportunity to feed back the results of their project to the community. This greatly reduced their potential for personal, academic and social learning from the project, as well as reducing the community's potential to positively engage with the

students and the college. Again, Shumer's Self-Assessment would benefit from the inclusion of a question on this topic, as these concerns are almost universally relevant to those coordinating CBL and CBR projects.

In short, we identified our four key concerns following our first year: involving students in the structures and processes of project planning and design; project evaluation; social and personal reflection; and the quality of student engagement with communities. We presented a mind-map of three of these concerns at the international Living Knowledge Conference in Belfast in August 2009.<sup>7</sup>

The process of evaluation we undertook, involving 3 separate components, was invaluable in highlighting deficiencies in our programme. Zlotkowski's report looked at the broader institutional and policy context and general potential for this kind of work. The questionnaires highlighted immediate strengths and weaknesses within the experience of a range of individuals involved with our programme. The Shumer Self-Assessment tool allowed us to articulate our own concerns, forcing us to consider a range of aspects of the programme which we might not have otherwise considered, and then giving us more specific questions on areas which we identified as weaknesses, to help us think about actions that could be taken to remedy them. While we would have liked to have had more completed questionnaires from students, community partners, and staff to inform our discussion, we still felt that the evaluation process as a whole had been quite comprehensive.

### **3. Taking action to address our concerns**

The identification of the above four key concerns led to several concrete actions. We decided to initially focus on three of the four, and to address the issue of student involvement in project planning later in our second year. As these concerns are shared among almost all practitioners of CBL and CBR, we briefly discuss our actions in relation to each.

The first set of actions centred on reflection. We wanted to assist the teaching staff in maximising students' critical and political thinking through personal and social reflection (we had a sense that most projects already involved some level of academic reflection). As a result we decided to highlight reflection as a topic for discussion at various for a, and to develop and deliver non-discipline-specific training to students on reflective practices.

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<sup>7</sup> An image of the mind-map is available at [http://www.communitylinks.ie/fileadmin/user\\_upload/SLWC/Documents/LK\\_09\\_final\\_poster.jpg](http://www.communitylinks.ie/fileadmin/user_upload/SLWC/Documents/LK_09_final_poster.jpg)

On the curriculum development side, we encouraged the incorporation of reflection into module descriptors so that it was an integrated learning outcome of the course. We also encouraged community partners to deliver a 'cultural induction' to their community to our students. We hoped this would help both staff and students gain insight into the social context of their project at the early stages of the collaboration, to deepen their reflection and learning. We also investigated with DIT's Students Union the opportunities for students to give voice and take action for social change beyond their coursework. We intend in the future to set up a student forum, which will also allow us continue to encourage these activities.

The second set of actions centred on maximising the quality of student engagement with communities. We highlighted this at initial meetings with staff and community partners, and in various discussion fora with all partners thereafter, including feeding it into our reflection classes with students. We also developed a set of information sheets for staff, students and community partners that we distributed and which could be downloaded from our webpage. These sheets explained the importance of the quality of engagement in collaborative projects and how it could be enhanced, as well as emphasising that quality of engagement was what made the project or partnership sustainable over the long-term<sup>8</sup>.

In relation to the issues of quality of engagement and reflection, and also as a general response to the isolation that staff and community partners involved in this kind of work can experience, we set up a Students Learning With Communities Practice Group. Staff, students and community partners meet informally at lunchtime, four times a year, to discuss ideas and projects, to inspire and motivate each other. We are looking to build on student involvement at this group.

The third set of actions centred on our concern for collecting and analysing high quality data to evaluate our work. We wanted to make sure we captured the experience of all partners at the start and end of projects. To this end, through consultation with each of our stakeholder groups, we redesigned our existing post-project evaluation forms and developed a short pre-project questionnaire that we encouraged all participants to complete. The pre-project questionnaires targeted participants' expectations, strengths, and weaknesses, and the post-

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<sup>8</sup> Our concern for quality of engagement also resulted in a broader investigation of support structures for students across DIT in areas such as insurance (e.g. public liability for students working off campus on projects and product development/liability insurances) and child protection policies for students engaging with children on projects.

project evaluations aimed to find out, among other things, what had changed over the course of the project. This helped us see the learning that had materialised during the project (or where opportunities for learning were missed). Our questionnaires were designed to be part of the reflective process, asking students about their perception of the role of their future profession in society. They also addressed what supports were needed on projects, and pointed us in the direction of how we could better deliver these to all partners. As we do not have direct access to students and/or community partners on all projects, we depend on staff who are co-ordinating projects to distribute the questionnaires and ensure that they are completed and returned. We are assessing ways in which we can increase the number of questionnaires returned to us. These forms are currently available on our website so that interested staff can download them and adapt as necessary<sup>9</sup>.

In terms of overall Programme evaluation we will continue to use Shumer's Self-Assessment on a yearly basis to review our performance to date and to plan for the year ahead. After the second year we will also be able to compare our responses to those of the previous year, which will be another measure of progress. We also encourage individual staff members to carry out this Self-Assessment if they are interested in evaluating their project, course or even department. We have another list of evaluation criteria from our funders which sets broad programme goals on which we have to report every quarter (these broader strategic goals are beyond the scope of this article). In the second half of 2009/10 we took a third year mathematics student for a six month placement to gather and analyse qualitative and quantitative data on the Programme, and to assist us in systemising our data collection and evaluation processes. We also set up a Students Learning with Communities Advisory Board which meets three times a year. It comprises representation from DIT students, DIT staff, community partners and other institutions. It has provided guidance and support in our work, and is a useful forum to which we can turn for advice on current concerns. It also provides us with the opportunity to evaluate our work during the academic year, (we have to prepare a report on our activities for the Board meeting), thus allowing us at regular intervals to measure the extent to which we are delivering on planned actions.

#### **4. Conclusion and Implications:**

The process of evaluating our work after a year has been enormously helpful. It has helped us to collaboratively identify and articulate some

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<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.communitylinks.ie/slwc/information-for-lecturers-project-co-ordinators/resources/>

unease we might have felt in relation to aspects of particular CBL or CBR projects, and to define what we could do to address the issues causing the unease. The material from outside DIT – Edward Zlotkowski’s report and the questions in Shumer’s Self-Assessment tool – showed us that most of our concerns were common to all practitioners of CBL and CBR. Even just realising that we were not alone in facing these challenges was hugely helpful, and presenting our findings at the end of year one at an international conference gave us the opportunity to hear how others were addressing these same issues in different countries and contexts.

The more detailed responses to our internal evaluation forms in DIT helped us to look at how these common challenges were manifest in our own institutional context. Responses to questions about what could be done to support the projects helped steer us in productive directions. The relatively low numbers of completed forms were tantalising, and reinforced our determination to develop pre-project questionnaires, and to promote the more widespread use of the forms the following year.

So this mix of external and internal perspectives and evidence was invaluable. The roundedness of the process helped build our confidence in the centrality of the challenges we had identified, and in our plans to address these. The evaluation process gave a new sense of purpose to our work in the following academic year, as well as a much-needed chance to reflect on our strengths and achievements to date.

This evaluation process would be helpful to anyone working in this field. As mentioned above, the current version of our pre- and post-project questionnaires are available on our website, and the Shumer Self-Assessment tool is available on-line (bearing in mind the suggestions we made above for additional questions). While not every institute is fortunate enough to have a report written on its work by an expert in CBL/CBR, our list of the challenges we faced, as well as spending a small amount of time reviewing the large body of literature on the area, will give an external perspective to any evaluation process. It is a process we highly recommend and one which we will undertake again in the summer of 2010.

There are, inevitably, gaps in the evaluation process we have used. While our evaluation to date has captured certain strengths and weaknesses of individual projects as well as of the overall Programme for Students Learning With Communities, we still have some way to go with respect to gathering quantitative data for the Programme. This, we know, is as essential as a qualitative understanding of the Programme in order to analyse (and promote) the reach of our work across the college as a whole.

We also have a long way to go in attempting to give fuller answers to the bigger questions, such as the social implications of our work, given that we are at an early stage of development. While we have gathered post-project questionnaires from community partners which indicate the extent to which individual projects have or have not met their needs, we have not as of yet carried out a significant 'impact evaluation' (Fisher & Cole, 1993, p. 141) which 'measures the broad consequences of a programme, such as how the lives of clients have improved or how the health of the community has changed or how the organization has been helped in achieving its mission.' Assessing the actual social impact of the work is a complex process that depends on long-established relationships with community partners, and long-running projects which have evolved over time. Ideally the impact of this work would also encompass a degree of policy change at local, national or international levels, and an evaluation in this area would also reveal whether this was being achieved. As our pilot project runs for three years, we would like to address this issue more closely in our final report on our work in 2011.

We can however outline some initial thoughts in this area. To begin with we have learnt that it is invaluable to have a central college office to support and co-ordinate community-based learning and research activities across the college. One reason for this is because certain elements of these pedagogical approaches, such as the development of social awareness around issues of disadvantage, need continual emphasis in order for student learning to be maximised. Staff in a central office will be in a position to be clear about what CBL and CBR entails and to draw out the importance of developing social insight to all partners. This central office does not have to place a huge demand on resources in order to be effective – in fact as our involvement in European funded projects show<sup>10</sup>, it can be a source of income and a hub for research. The projects themselves can also be rolled out at relatively low cost, provided there is an enthusiastic staff member to take on the planning, and a community partner to match.

Furthermore as our office becomes more established it is becoming a contact point for community groups who wish to access the resources of the institution. As they gain access to DIT staff and students through these collaborative projects, these community groups have begun in small ways to input into, and broaden, classroom teaching and research,

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<sup>10</sup> DIT, through the Programme for Students Learning With Communities, is one of 26 European partners in the EU FP7-funded PERARES (Public Engagement with Research and Research Engagement with Society) project which runs from 2010-2014, designed to build structures and capacity for CBR across Europe.

consequently having a direct effect on the Higher Education agenda and the formation of future professionals.

If, as the The Taskforce on Active Citizenship (2007, p. 22) recommends, 'appropriate resources, to promote, support and link together citizenship initiatives across the Higher Education sector' are put in place, then our students will become more critically aware and motivated to work for social change. The strengths and needs of communities with which students collaborate will become more visible, and these communities will have more influence on the kind of society we become.

If the HEA succeeds in its proposal to universalize service-learning across all third level colleges in Ireland then the scope for colleges to engage students to learn with communities will be maximised. In the future there will be national data with which to comprehensively analyse the impact of this kind of learning. There is also a push at a European level (albeit a small one in comparison to other areas), for example under the Science in Society Framework 7 funding call, to explore the role of civil society in science research. If staff and students can be supported to contribute to these European projects, then impact on student learning and community-university engagement can be analysed in a comparative fashion across countries, and best practice at a European and international level accessed and adopted more easily.

We have witnessed a growing interest and engagement in CBL and CBR in DIT. It indicates that staff and students are willing to explore a variety of educational methodologies and educational contexts. We are not so naive as to think that everyone will adopt this methodology or that it is universally suitable as a teaching or learning style. We would however like to see at least one module in every course incorporate CBL or CBR, so that each student is exposed to these methodologies, which offer a chance to explore a range of learning styles. We feel there is something for everyone to learn through CBR and CBL, particularly through the process of reflective learning, which draws on the personal, academic and social experience of the student. Finally CBL and CBR bring the community and voluntary sector into the formal education of students, a sector which for some will be the context for their professional lives. This in itself could be reason enough (notwithstanding all the additional benefits outlined above) to provide students with an opportunity to learn through engaging with communities, alongside more traditional theoretical classroom learning and industrial placements.



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